

A Jealous God

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning and welcome to worship. This morning at Church of the Advent, my name is Jeff. I'm one of the pastors here. And I want to welcome you, especially if this is your first time with us this morning.

We'd love to meet you and just know your name and hear part of your story. We're so glad that you joined us for worship this morning. Let's pray together as we come to God's Word together.

Lord, we believe that all Scripture is breathed out by you. And it's for our good.

It's profitable for teaching and for reproof and correction and training in righteousness. All Scripture is inspired by you, especially hard stories, hard, difficult passages like the one we're going to talk about today.

And so, we pray what we just sang earlier, Lord, that you would come, your Holy Spirit would come, and teach our souls to love your truth.

[1 : 04] Sanctify us in your truth. Your Word is truth. Come, Holy Spirit, and speak to us, we pray. In Christ's name, amen. Amen. Well, many years ago on her talk show, Oprah Winfrey described an experience that she had of one Sunday morning when she was sitting in her church, when she was in her late 20s, and she heard something about God that really troubled her.

And this is how she describes this moment at church. She said, I was going to this church where you had to get there at 8 o'clock in the morning or else you couldn't get a seat.

And a very charismatic minister was preaching, and everybody was into the sermon, and he was preaching about how great God was and how omniscient and omnipresent He is.

But then he said, The Lord thy God is a jealous God. And I was caught up in the rapture of the moment until he said, Jealous. Something struck me.

I'm thinking that God is all these things, and He's also jealous? Jealous? God is jealous of me? Something about that didn't feel right in my spirit because I believe that God is love, and God is in all things.

[2 : 22] And that's when the search for something more than doctrine started to stir within me. And then she goes on to kind of describe her crisis of faith and how she left the Christian faith.

How about you? As you think about this idea of God being a jealous God, how does that hit you? Does it make sense to you intuitively?

Or does it trouble you somewhat like it did for Oprah? What does it mean for God to be a jealous God? That's what we're going to talk about this morning.

And as we do, I want to remind us that we are in a series in Psalm 106, a series that we're calling Music in the Wilderness. And I want to remind us that Psalm 106 was written during a time of Israel's exile in Babylon.

It's a song that as they were in exile and they were singing this, it recalled many of the formative experiences that they had experienced centuries before in the wilderness after God saved them from Egypt and through the Red Sea.

[3 : 24] It's a song that reminded them what it looks like to trust, worship, and obey God in seasons of life that feel difficult and dry and disorienting.

Psalm 106 reminds us that we're all spiritually homeless. We're all ultimately wanderers and pilgrims who are on our way passing through to our true home.

And so because of this, in the wilderness of life, we start to experience the symptoms of being spiritually homeless. And so in our series, we've looked at a few of those symptoms.

We've looked at discontent. We've looked at envy. We've looked at idolatry. And last week, we looked at unbelief. And this morning, we come to the symptom of infidelity.

Infidelity. Psalm 106, 28 through 31 recalls a story from Numbers chapter 25 that was read earlier. And it's a scene where the people of Israel commit both physical and spiritual adultery.

[4 : 31] It's a situation that arouses the anger and even the jealousy of the Lord. But it's also a situation that arouses His love and His mercy and His grace.

And so that's what we're going to look at this morning. What does it mean for God to be a jealous God? First of all, it means that He is a king who upholds His glory.

It means that He is a king who upholds this glory. Numbers chapter 25, verses 1 through 3 tell us that when Israel lived in this area called Shittim, that many of these people committed adultery with the daughters of Moab, a Canaanite people that was living in the place where they were encamped. They committed not only physical adultery, but they committed spiritual adultery by worshiping and bowing down and making sacrifices to the Canaanite gods. Not specifically, Baal of Paor, who is the Canaanite god of fertility.

And then in verse 6, we see a particular example of this. We see a man named Zimri who brings a Midianite woman into his home in the sight of Moses and all the people.

[5 : 50] And it is open. It is public. He has absolutely no shame about it. He does this in front of everybody. And in Zimri, we see a snapshot.

We see a representative picture of the spiritual state of the whole people during this time. Instead of offering themselves to the Lord in heart, mind, and soul, they have offered themselves to other gods.

They have offered themselves to other lovers. And in doing so, they have openly and publicly and fragrantly violated the Lord's covenant.

They've committed adultery against the Lord. Their physical infidelity, on one hand, certainly broke God's law as he had revealed in the Ten Commandments. But it was their spiritual infidelity.

It was their worshiping and bowing down and making sacrifices to other gods that was even more serious. And tragically, this would not be the only time Israel would do this.

[6 : 51] We know as we read the rest of the Old Testament that this would be a pattern that would be repeated all throughout the Old Testament, throughout the period of the judges and the kings. And because it became a pattern, it would eventually lead them into exile in Babylon where they find themselves in Psalm 106.

And so how does God respond? How does God respond to the people's infidelity? Well, he responds like a king who upholds his glory.

In verse 3, verse 3 tells us that his anger was kindled against the people. And he tells Moses to take the leaders of each tribe and to put them to death as a representative example, as a representative punishment on behalf of the whole people.

If you're paying careful attention to the story you read earlier, you remember, you realize, that Moses doesn't actually do this. He actually waters down this command from God.

And instead, he chooses a different route by telling these leaders to instead put to death the specific individuals who had worshipped and bowed down to Baal. And we're not sure that the details of the text aren't exactly clear on the chronology.

[8 : 07] We're not sure if the Lord sends a plague because of Moses' failure to carry out this command or because of the people's sin more broadly or perhaps both.

But somewhere in this story, we learn that the Lord sends a plague on the people. And so, although we don't know quite when the plague happened, here's what we do know.

We do know that the primary tension of the story, the primary tension of the story is that we have the people's open, flagrant, and violation of the Lord's covenant.

And we have an unfulfilled command to carry out God's judgment. And in the middle of this tension, the Lord sends a plague among his people.

And so, there's this narrative tension of what is going to happen and how is this going to be resolved. And into the tension of this story between the people's sin and the unfulfilled judgment of God, in the middle of this tension comes a Levite priest named Phineas.

[9 : 19] A Levite priest named Phineas. What is a priest? What is a priest? A priest is someone who represents people to God and who represents God to people.

A priest represents people to God and represents God to people. And in verses 7 through 8, Phineas does something that surprises all of us, all readers of the story.

It's shocking. It's shocking to readers of the story. It probably would have been shocking and surprising to the people who witnessed it and experienced it and saw it happen. In verses 7 and 8, when he sees Zimri bring the Midianite woman into his home, he goes in after them, and he takes a spear, and he runs it through both of them as they're in bed together, killing both of them. And God responds by stopping the plague. The plague ends. In verse 10, Verse 10, The Lord said to Moses, Phineas, the son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the priest, has turned back my wrath from the people of Israel in that he was jealous with my jealousy among them, so that I did not consume the people of Israel in my jealousy.

The act of Phineas the priest, although perhaps shocking and surprising to us, is seen as a good and faithful act of the Lord.

[10:49] It is seen as an act of atonement. Of atonement. Atonement is a rich, multifaceted Old Testament word that means it's a sacrificial payment for sin that provides forgiveness for sinners and creates peace with God by turning aside his wrath.

So atonement, on one hand, provides forgiveness for sinners through a sacrificial payment for sin, and it also creates peace with God by turning aside his judgment and wrath.

And atonement is something that only a priest could do. Not just any one of the Israelites could have done this because priests, again, represent people to God and they represent God to people. And in verses 12 through 13, the Lord says, because of the jealousy of Phineas, because of the jealousy of Phineas, I am making a covenant of peace.

I am making a perpetual priesthood. This is a promise to God's people that there would always be a priesthood, that there would always be a means for which God to have a relationship with him, that he wouldn't totally turn his back on them, that he wouldn't completely abandon them, but there would be a perpetual priesthood, a means of living in right relationship with him.

[12:12] And this is a heavy story. This is a shocking story. This is a surprising story. But in the shock and in the surprise of this story, I actually think that there, I believe there are clues for what it means that God is a jealous God.

And before we look at those clues, I just wanna first acknowledge that for some things in this story that might trouble or confuse us, for example, like God's command to put these leaders to death, or Phineas' actions to put these two people to death.

These are things that, as we read this story in the 21st century with modern American Western eyes, these are things that legitimately might trouble or confuse us. And we might think, how is this fair?

How is this right? How is this good? And that is a legitimate question. And it's one that we have addressed previously in this series as we've thought through the reality of God's judgment in the Old Testament in particular and the reality of God's judgment in general.

And so rather than spend more time on it here, I would encourage you to kind of go back and listen to the sermon on discontent that we did a few weeks ago where we spent more time unpacking this question about God's judgment, especially in the Old Testament.

[13:39] There are legitimate questions when we have a difficult story like this, and I don't want to minimize that. But I also don't want us to miss something. I also don't want us to miss the fact that as many of us read this story with modern 21st century eyes, we're probably more likely to be troubled by God's judgment and by Phineas' actions than we are by the people's physical and spiritual infidelity.

I know that was true for me when I sat down to read this passage for the first time. We're likely more troubled by God and Phineas than we are by the people. But it should be the other way around.

It should be the other way around. The people's open and flagrant violation of the Lord's covenant should be the thing that shocks us and surprises us and troubles us the most.

And that is because Israel's God is a king. Because Yahweh is the holy king over all the nations, over all the earth.

He is the king who has rescued his people and brought them up out of slavery and is taking them towards the promised land who has entered a covenant with them that they might live in an intimate relationship with him and know him and dwell with him and walk with him.

[15:08] And not only that, but that he might use them to be a blessing to all the nations of the earth, that he might use them to extend his kingdom, to extend his glory all over the face of the earth and to push back the kingdom of darkness and sin and death and evil and Satan.

It's what Isaac Watts talked about in his hymn, Joy to the World, that he comes to make his blessings flow far as the curse is found.

This is the mission that Yahweh has invited them into. This is the relationship he's invited them into. His kingship is about blessing and redeeming and restoring all of creation. To obey him is to enter into God's original intended purposes for humanity.

To follow his law is to live into what it means to be fully human, to live into human flourishing. And this is why there are such serious consequences for Israel's infidelity.

Because it defames the glory. It defames the name. It defames the reputation of the holy king of Israel. And it rejects his redemptive purposes in the world.

[16:27] And so in the middle of this open infidelity, this open violation, and between God's judgment stands a mediator, stands a priest who is jealous for the glory of God, who is jealous for the purposes of God in the world, who makes atonement for the sins of the people and ushers into, ushers in a covenant of peace.

And in this way, hopefully, you're able to see Phineas foreshadows the person and work of Jesus Christ, another priest who would be jealous for the purposes of God to come and make atonement for the sins of the whole world.

So what does it mean that God is a jealous God? It means that he's a king who defends his own glory and honor by upholding his covenant with his people, not in a capricious or arbitrary way, but to bless and redeem and restore his good creation.

And so, why is this good news for us? Like, how does this land, how does this hit home for us?

Because if we think about it, like, on a human level, we tend to dislike and avoid people who are glory hungry.

Like, we tend to dislike people who are obsessed with constantly defending their name. People who are obsessed with constantly defending their reputation and making sure they look good to other people.

[18:09] You know, we would say that, you know, people like that are, they're full of themselves. They're prideful. They're completely narcissistic, right? On a human level, we don't like people who are obsessed with defending their own glory.

But this is not true for God. God being committed to His own glory is actually good news for us. And that's because what brings God glory is what brings us peace with Him.

What brings God glory is to save and make atonement for sinners. What brings God's glory is to forgive those who are guilty of infidelity towards Him.

What brings God's glory is to save and bless and redeem and restore His creation. redemption.

God is the one being in the whole universe for whom defending His own glory is an act of love, is an act of grace, is an act of mercy because it allows us to be brought into relationship with Him.

It allows us to be invited into His story of redemption. God being a jealous God means that He is a king who upholds His own glory.

[19:32] And secondly, we see that it means that He is a husband who loves His bride. That He is a husband who loves His bride. Our covenant relationship with God means that He is our king.

And it also means that He is our spouse. God's. This is a theme that runs throughout the Bible that God's relationship with His people is a marital relationship.

If you think about it, the Bible actually starts with a marriage and it ends with a marriage. At the beginning of the story in Genesis where we see God's good purposes for His creation, we see the first marriage between husband and wife.

And at the end of the story in Revelation where we see a picture of our future hope, we also see a marriage that all of the other human marriages point to. We see the wedding supper of the Lamb.

We see the marriage of Christ and His church as heaven is married to earth. And so we, as we see this both in the bookends of the biblical story, we also see this in the whole story of redemption.

[20:40] All over the Old Testament, God reveals Himself as a husband who is passionate about His bride. Isaiah 62, as a young man marries a young woman and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.

Hosea chapter 2, I will betroth you to me forever. I will betroth you to me in righteousness and justice and steadfast love and mercy. Isaiah 54, for your maker is your husband.

In the New Testament, Jesus describes the kingdom of God as a wedding feast. He actually refers to Himself as a bridegroom. In Ephesians chapter 5, perhaps the most clearest place, Paul says

that the marriage between a husband and wife is this profound mystery that is a picture of Christ and the church.

The story of the Bible is that God is a bridegroom who longs to marry humanity as His bride. And this overarching story frames our story here in Numbers 25 and it helps us to see and clue into the heart of the jealousy of God.

Because we know that in any marriage, there is a, there is a jealousy between a husband and a wife that is good and holy and right and pure.

[22 : 15] So, last week I actually had the chance to go see the play Hamilton live at the Kennedy Center. That was pretty amazing. Like many of you, I have for years listened to the soundtrack on repeat.

I watched it on Disney Plus in the middle of the pandemic when it came out. And so, it was amazing to see it live in person. And if you have listened to the soundtrack or if you've seen it, you know that one of the most powerful, one of the most poignant songs in the whole play is the song Burn, which is the song that's sung by Eliza Hamilton in the scene where she finds out about her husband Alexander's infidelity with another woman.

His affair, Alexander Hamilton's affair with Maria Reynolds had become publicly known through something called the Reynolds pamphlet, which he had partially published to clear his name and reputation.

And so, in this song, Eliza sings these words about the pain of being betrayed by her husband. She says, I saved every letter you wrote me. From the moment I read them, I knew you were mine. You said you were mine. I thought you were mine. You published the letters she wrote you. You told the whole world how you brought this girl into our bed. In clearing your name, you have ruined our lives.

[23 : 39] I'm erasing myself from the narrative. Let future historians wonder how Eliza reacted when you broke her heart. You have torn it all apart. And I'm watching it burn.

You forfeit all rights to my heart. You forfeit the place in our bed. You'll sleep in your office instead with only the memories of when you were mine. I hope that you burn.

These are the words of a burning heart. A heart that burns with hurt. A heart that burns with anger. A heart that burns with jealousy.

In the wake of infidelity. Most of us can agree there's a good and right jealousy between husband and wife between one another.

It is right for them to feel protective over their spouse's affections and their love. It is right for them to feel betrayed and hurt, jealous their spouse has been unfaithful.

[24 : 48] One, I think we can sympathize with Oprah's trouble with the jealousy of God if it's about envy, being jealous of somebody.

But Oprah's trouble with the jealousy of God is that she failed to see the difference between jealousy of and jealousy for. Between jealousy of and jealousy for.

God is not jealous of people. He's not jealous of you and I. He is our maker. He is our creator. He's not lacking in any way. He's not envious of anything that you or I have.

But he is jealous for us. He is jealous for us because he is our husband and we are his bride as the church.

And this is good news for us. It's good news for us especially for those of us who struggle at times with feeling like we're not enough either to God or to other people.

[25 : 50] It's good news for us for us for those of us who maybe struggle at times with feeling unlovable. Feeling undesirable. Maybe this morning or recently or in your past you've been tempted to think thoughts like this.

How could anybody love me? How could God possibly love me because of who I am and what I've done? Nobody would ever want to marry me.

Nobody would ever want to date me. Nobody would ever want to befriend me. And if that's you this morning or if that's been you in the past let me invite you to consider the words in Song of Songs 8, 6 through 7.

These are the words not only of King Solomon for his bride but they are the words of God's love for his covenant people. Song of Songs chapter 8 verses 6 or 7 for love is as strong as death.

It's jealousy unyielding as the grave and it burns like blazing fire like a mighty flame. Many waters cannot quench love and rivers cannot wash it away.

[27 : 06] The God of the Bible has a heart that burns for you. He has a heart that is on fire for you. He is passionate about your affections. He longs for intimacy with you. He longs for you to know him, to walk with him, to live in close fellowship with him, to obey him. And this is why he also can't be indifferent about our sin because he is personally affected by it. Just as a husband and wife is personally affected by the sin of their spouse, especially their unfaithfulness.

Our sin grieves his heart. Ephesians chapter 4 says that our sin grieves the Holy Spirit who dwells in us. The love of God for his people is both strong and it is sensitive. It is powerful and it is passionate. Friends, do you know this God? Have you seen how he has revealed himself this way in his word?

[28 : 29] Have you seen his burning heart of love for you? Is God just some distant emotionally unattached authority figure for you?

Or is he your lover? Is he your bridegroom? Is he your spouse? God is jealous for you because he loves you. And the question for all of us, the question for you is are you jealous for him?

Are you jealous for him? Are your affections stirred with love for him? Are you jealous? Are you passionate? Are you zealous for the glory of God and for his redemptive purposes in the world? Is your heart stirred to know him, to worship him, to live in close fellowship with him, and to extend his kingdom in the world? Or are the affections of your heart drawn towards other lovers?

Our sin not only breaks God's law, it breaks his heart. And it's true that in the Christian life, from time to time, maybe every week, every day, our affections for God can often wane or harden or grow stale, and so we need our affections for him to be stirred again and again and again we need our jealousy for him, our love for him, our passion for his glory to be stirred again and again and again through the word, through prayer, through the sacraments, through the ordinary means of grace that display for us again and again the good news of the gospel, the glory of God in have our cold hard hearts softened the way that we have our affections stirred and renewed for

[30 : 42] God again and again is to see that Jesus Christ is the burning heart of God's love for his people.

When you look at him you see God's burning heart of love for us because in Jesus we see both a king who upholds his glory and we see a husband who loves his bride.

In Jesus we see a king who is also a priest. In Jesus we have an even better priest than Phineas who was so committed to the glory of his father who was so committed to his redemptive purposes in his world that he inaugurated a new covenant a covenant of peace by making atonement with his own body and blood a covenant where he is our perpetual eternal high priest and a covenant that draws us in and sends us out into God's redemptive purposes in the world.

Phineas' spear pierced the guilty and made atonement for one people at one time. But Jesus was pierced for us.

Isaiah 53, Jesus was the one who was pierced with nails on the cross in our place. The guiltless one for the guilty. He was pierced for our transgressions.

[32 : 08] He was crushed for our iniquities. The punishment that brought us peace was upon him and by his wounds we are healed. In Jesus when we see a king who upholds the glory of God and we also see a husband who loves his bride.

In Jesus we see a lover, a bridegroom who is both strong and sensitive. We see a husband who says to us my love burns for you like blazing fire like a mighty flame.

My love for you is as strong as death and I went to the cross to show it to you and prove it to you. It's jealousy is unyielding as the grave. Only Jesus to show his love for us overcame the many waters cannot quench his love for us.

Many rivers cannot will never wash it away. Not even our worst sins. Not even our worst moments. Not even our moments of infidelity against him or against others. His words to us here at this table that we hear every week are not only the words of a king but not only the words of a savior but the words of a bridegroom speaking to his bride this is my body which is broken for you.

[33 : 45] This is my blood which is shed for you. These are the words of a husband speaking to his bride. And no matter how cold our affections are to him no matter how many times we have been unfaithful to him.

He will always be faithful to us because he is the jealous God. He is the jealous husband who he's the king who upholds his glory.

And he's the husband who loves his bride. And so we are invited into his covenant of peace where our sins are forgiven. And in so doing we're caught up in his story of redemption to all creation. And we are drawn into the burning fire of his heart of love for us. And friends this is why the jealousy of God is not only good news for us but it is good news for the whole world. Let's pray. Our Father in heaven thank you that you are a king who is so passionate about your own glory that you would give your life for us on the cross. [35 : 14] That you're a husband who has given yourself in love for us. Lord wherever our affections are this morning I pray that we might see your glory that we might see the blazing fire of your love for us Lord come Holy Spirit and set our hearts on fire with jealousy for you. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit Amen.